



Chapter Ten

Vedic Culture

Hinduism Defined

When we speak of Krsna consciousness we should not confuse it with Hinduism. Krsna consciousness originates in the ancient Vedic literatures; Hinduism is not mentioned in the Vedas at all.

Furthermore, the current popular usage of the term "Hinduism" does not correspond to its original meaning. The word "Hindu" is a Persian mispronunciation of "Sindhu", the Sanskrit name of the Indus River. For the Mogul invaders, who entered India by crossing the Indus, it was natural to refer to the conquered territory as the Land of the Indus River, or Hindustan. Thus a "Hindu" is, properly speaking, an inhabitant of Hindustan, irrespective of his religion. The British, however, used "Hindu" to refer to Indians who were not Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, or members of other religious groups for which the British had names. "Hindu" was used as a catchall to describe literally thousands of quite different religious and cultural patterns over the immense area of the Indian sub-continent.

Thus to speak of "Hinduism" is so misleading as to be meaningless. Our practice, in accordance with the teaching of the Vedic scriptures, is properly called sanatana-dharma, which is best translated "eternal law". For ordinary usage though, Srila Prabhupada has taught us that the clearest and most informative name for our practice is Krsna consciousness.

Varnasrama-dharma, the Vedic Social System

Varnasrama-dharma is the Vedic social system which divides society into two sets of four divisions, the first set on the basis of occupation, and the second set on the basis of spiritual position (asrama).

The four varnas (occupations) are the Brahmanas, who are the intellectuals; the ksatriyas, warriors and administrators; the vaisyas, farmers and merchants; and the sudras, laborers. A person's place within this system is determined by his qualities and activities, not his birth, and he must be trained in order to qualify for a particular position. The duties of the four varnas may be briefly summarized as follows.



The Brahmanas are teachers, who teach by example as well as by precept. They must know moral principles and be self-controlled. They also serve by guiding the ksatriyas in order to ensure that all people follow religious principles.

The ksatriyas administer in accordance with the directions received from the Brahmanas and the scriptures. They must be thoroughly religious. They are known as "naradeva" or God's representatives on earth. If there is a battle, they personally lead the military forces.

The vaisyas are in charge of agriculture, commerce, and cow protection. Since the purpose of society is the conduct of a simple, spiritual life, there is no production of or commerce in goods for over-luxurious living and sinful activities.

Sudras are the laborer class and render service by helping the other three classes. The social body is likened to the human body, with the Brahmanas as the head, the ksatriyas as the arms, the vaisyas as the stomach, and the sudras as the legs. This is a natural system for dividing labor, not an artificial caste system. Within this system, everyone is gradually elevated to spiritual realization under the guidance of the Brahmanas, in a social system which satisfies the actual needs of all its members without disturbing their spiritual progress.

The four asramas represent stages within the life of an individual, as he grows in spiritual consciousness and renunciation. They are brahmacharya, or student life; grhastha, or married life; vanaprastha, or retired life; and sannyasa, or the renounced order of life.

One becomes a brahmachari at the age of five and lives with the spiritual master until one is twenty-five. He receives both spiritual and material education, and is thus prepared to understand the necessity of developing spiritual consciousness throughout his life. Simultaneously, he is trained in his varna or occupation.

At age twenty-five the brahmachari may leave the guru-kula and take a wife. His training will make him a qualified husband able to lead his family toward spiritual realization. At the age of fifty he retires from family life and visits holy places with his wife; this is vanaprastha. At the age of seventy-five he confides the care of his wife to his grown-up son and takes sannyasa, preparing himself fully for going back to Godhead by constantly chanting the Lord's name and serving Him without any other business.



Women in Krsna Consciousness

Questions and Answers by Visakha-devi dasi

Q Why should women be interested in Krsna consciousness?

A So they can realize they' re not women! If we think of ourselves as "women", we reveal our ignorance of our actual identity. The word "woman" refers to the temporary material body, not to the eternal, spiritual soul, the person within the body. In maybe forty or sixty years, the body I' m wearing will perish, and I' ll no longer be a woman. But the living force, the soul within the body, won' t perish. Krsna consciousness provides an understanding of the relationship between the soul and matter and the Supreme Soul, Krsna. Human intelligence is meant for contemplating these subjects, not for dwelling on materialistic thoughts based on false identification with the temporary body.

Q What do you think of the women' s liberation movement?

A The highest liberation is to go back home, back to Godhead, and never again face the miseries of birth, death, old age, disease, and death. Although the woman' s liberation movement may offer some worthwhile proposals, it generally ignores this highest goal. But by becoming Krsna conscious, a woman is liberated in this life and the next; so Krsna consciousness is the real woman' s liberation movement.

Q In the Krsna consciousness movement, what is the position of woman devotees?

A From the spiritual viewpoint, men and woman (and all other living entities) are equal. The soul within the body is part and parcel of Krsna and is equal in quality and quantity to all other souls. But from the material, bodily point of view, obviously there are differences.

Q What about those differences?

A As far as serving Krsna and preaching Krsna consciousness, material differences are ignored. Men and women serve the Supreme Lord' s Deity form in the temple worshipping, cleaning, cooking - and they go out daily to preach to interested people and distribute literature about Krsna consciousness. Woman with children both care for their children and spread Krsna consciousness along side their unmarried godsisters. Actually, to raise a child as a devotee of God is in itself a great service to Krsna.



Q But I've heard that you think women are inferior to men. Is that true?

A As I mentioned before, spiritually there's no distinction. In BhagavadGita Krsna says that both men and women are eligible to attain the highest destination, to return to the kingdom of God, if they take shelter of Him. Spiritually there's no duality, no inferiority or superiority based on the body and mind. But there are material differences: women are generally not as physically strong as men, but only women can bear children and nourish them with their breast milk. So it's natural that women's duties are different from men's in some ways.

Q Today many people reject that idea. It won't make your movement very popular among women.

A We can't change the Krsna conscious philosophy to make it popular. Nor are we so concerned with popularity. We simply want to present Krsna's teachings as they are, and those who hear receptively will benefit. The first step in spiritual understanding is to transcend the bodily concept of life. To think "I am a man" or "I am a woman" is to be in illusion. The body is a material dress for the soul, a dress that's changing from moment to moment, as the body develops, and will change entirely at death. But the constant within the body is the soul, which is not subject to birth, death, or any other material influence.

Q How do men and women relate to each other in Krsna consciousness?

A Except for his wife, a Krsna conscious man should regard every woman as he would his mother. So in Krsna consciousness the relationship between men and women is based not on lust but mutual respect, with Krsna in the center. If this mentality is absent, men and women mix too freely and their relationship may easily degrade into immorality and mutual exploitation.

Q What about more intimate relationships?

A In more intimate relationships, the man protects the woman. In a woman's youth, her father protects her; after marriage, her husband protects her; and in later life her grown sons protect her.



Q What do you mean, "protect"?

A Protection from illusion and degradation is the real protection. When the father, husband, and sons are fully trained in spiritual principles by the spiritual master, they are qualified to guide their family members.

Bhagavad-Gita points out that when the religious tradition in the family breaks down, the chastity and faithfulness of women are shaken. As men and women mix freely, the result is abortion and unwanted progeny. From such immorality and licentiousness come broken homes and the degradation of the whole society. Conversely, when the husband is a dedicated devotee of God and the wife is loyal, good progeny and a harmonious society result.

Q But what if the woman wants to be more than just a housewife?

A That is welcome and encouraged. Women in the Krsna consciousness movement sing, write, photograph, paint, act, sculpt, teach, and dance. One of my godsisters in our West Virginia farm community is an architect. Now she' s helping plan a huge temple that the devotees there will build over the next few years. So there' s no hindrance at all to a woman who wants to use her special talents to serve Krsna.

Q Can women become leaders?

A Real leadership is to teach by example and precept how to go back home, back to Godhead, at the end of this lifetime. A fully Krsna conscious devotee, whether man or woman, is actually more of a leader than all the so-called leaders of modern society. Materialistic leaders simply increase our material problems. A devotee decreases those problems to nil. That is real leadership.

The Four Yugas

A Yuga is an age with specific characteristics; in each Yuga different incarnations of Krsna appear. Four Yugas make a cycle, a thousand of which make one daylight period in the life of Lord Brahma; that is also the duration of one night in his life.



1 Satya-yuga is the Golden Age which lasts for 1,600,000 years, in which the process of self-realization is meditation on Visnu. At this time, ninety-nine percent of the population is on the highest platform of spiritual existence, and the average life span is one hundred thousand years.

2 Treta-yuga is the Silver Age which lasts for 1,200,000 years, in which the process of self-realization is opulent sacrifices. God consciousness is reduced to seventy-five percent of the population and the average life span is ten thousand years.

3 Dvapara-yuga is the Bronze Age which lasts for 800,000 years, in which the process of self-realization is elaborate Deity worship in the temples. God consciousness is reduced to fifty percent of the population and the average life span is one thousand years.

4 Kali-yuga is the Iron Age of quarrel and hypocrisy which lasts for 432,000 years, in which the process of self-realization is sankirtana, the chanting of the holy names of God. God consciousness is reduced to twenty-five percent of the population and steadily dwindling, and the maximum life span is one hundred years and likewise decreasing. We have already passed through 5,000 years of the current Kali-yuga. A man will be old if he reaches the age of twenty-five, and the only food will be meat. There will be no produce, grains, or milk products.

After the destruction which follows the end of Kali-yuga, Satya-yuga begins again. The Yuga cycle is thus a continuous one like the cycle of the seasons.

The Holy Rivers

The Ganges

The Ganges is sacred because it is water that emanates from the toe of Lord Visnu. Anyone who bathes in the Ganges becomes free from sinful reactions. It is observed that the Ganges never becomes impure or contaminated, even when dirty substances are found in her waters. Many persons who are ill become cured after regularly bathing in and drinking the water of the Ganges. When a devotee leaves his body, the remains are cremated and the ashes are thrown into the Ganges.

Lord Vamanadeva begged three steps of land from Bali Maharaja. With the first step He spanned the planet. His second step encompassed the universe and His toe pierced the covering of the universe so that the transcendental waters of the Causal Ocean leaked



through. These are the waters of the Ganges. It is also said that the Ganges began when Lord Brahma washed the feet of Lord Vamanadeva' s lotus feet with the water from his kamandalu. Elsewhere it is stated that the Ganges came to earth by being requested by Bhagiratha Maharaja.

The Ganges first came to the heavenly planets, but was afraid to come to earth because she would fall with such force that she would continue to travel to the hellish planets where many sinful people would bathe in her waters and thus deposit their sins. It was then arranged for Lord Siva to prevent that by catching the water on his head. Mother Ganges was also informed that saintly people would bathe in her waters, which would counteract the effects from any sinful people.

The Yamuna

At the time of Lord Krsna' s appearance, His father Vasudeva crossed the Yamuna six miles downstream (from Vrndavana) at Mathura carrying the Baby Lord in his arms. Although the river' s waters had parted obligingly, Baby Krsna was nonetheless swept from the secure grasp of His father by a strong wave. Goddess Yamuna appeared to Vasudeva gently fondling Krsna and explained that she had purposely snatched Him away in order to get a chance to caress Him affectionately.

Due to this incident, and because the Lord so often used to perform His pastimes on her sandy banks or within her waters, Yamuna is considered by Krsna' s devotees to be India' s most sacred river. The Vrajanavasis say that mere darsana of the Yamuna is worth many baths in the Ganges.

Born as the daughter of the sun god, Goddess Yamuna in the form of a river rises in the Himalayas and flows for eight hundred miles until she meets the Ganga at Prayag (Allahabad). Pilgrims delight in bathing in her waters throughout the year because they know that by doing so the sins of millions of past lifetimes are washed away. However, during the month of Karttika (Oct-Nov) the spiritually purifying effect of bathing in her waters is magnified 1,000 times.

Miles Davis, *Touring the Land of Krishna* pp. 38-9